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RUEHUL/AMEMBASSY SEOUL PRIORITY 3049
RUEHKO/AMEMBASSY TOKYO PRIORITY 9193
RUEHWL/AMEMBASSY WELLINGTON PRIORITY 1738
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BANGKOK 002364

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [KIRF](#) [TH](#)

SUBJECT: THAI PRO-BUDDHISM PROTEST WILTS IN THE HEAT

REF: BANGKOK 2327 (AMBASSADOR,S MEETING WITH PRASONG)

Classified By: Political Officer Guy Margalith, reason: 1.4 (d).

SUMMARY

11. (SBU) Approximately 2,000 monks and laypersons demanding the constitutional designation of Buddhism as Thailand's state religion protested peacefully on April 25 and 26 in front of parliament. The fact that the protests did not draw as large a crowd as expected indicates that, at least so far, this issue has failed to excite the interest that many had hoped -- and some had feared -- it would generate. While the protest did not include any anti-coup messages, political actors have attempted to seize the issue to advance their own agenda. End Summary.

BUDDHIST GROUPS MOBILIZE

12. (U) Approximately 2,000 Buddhist clergy and laypeople representing several mainstream Thai Buddhist organizations gathered in front of the parliament on April 25-26 in the largest post-coup religious protest to date. The groups have been publicly campaigning for a constitutional provision designating Buddhism as Thailand's state religion since February and have threatened to continue protesting for up to a year if necessary.

13. (U) Buddhism has not been designated as Thailand's state religion in prior constitutions even though 95 percent of Thais are Buddhist. Clergy-led groups launched an ultimately unsuccessful campaign to insert language designating Buddhism as the state religion in the 1997 constitution, and have vowed not to accept a similar outcome during the present debate.

RECORD HEAT CONTRIBUTES TO LOW ATTENDANCE

14. (U) While event organizers promised to turn the steps of parliament into a temple and mobilize hundreds of thousands of demonstrators, the actual turnout was markedly lower. Hours after the protests began, fewer than 1,000 monks and only 100-200 laypeople had turned out to brave the sweltering heat. While some monks and laypeople marched to the protest

from outside the capital -- including one former senator theatrically riding on the back of an elephant -- the protest remained much smaller than many had anticipated. Although many Thai appear inclined to favor making Buddhism the state religion, there does not yet appear to be a strong, organized movement supporting it. Record breaking heat -- the press reported it was the hottest day in the last 47 years -- probably also kept attendance down.

STICKING TO MESSAGE

15. (U) The mood was decidedly low key as monks and nuns calmly listened to speakers, prayed or chanted. (Note: When demonstrating on political topics, monks generally make their point by virtue of their presence; they would not engage in the types of cheering or fist-waving typical of non-monks. End Note.) Representatives of Buddhist educational institutions, youth groups, temples, and charitable organizations -- some closely affiliated with the monarchy -- argued that designating Buddhism as the state religion in the constitution would improve Buddhist observance and reduce "moral degradation" in society. Some speakers argued the clause would help reduce corruption and dishonesty in Thai politics.

16. (U) Absent from the rally were any anti-coup groups or pro-democracy protesters with an anti-government message. Also absent were incendiary messages about Islam or other religions. We observed a woman wearing an Islamic headscarf passing through the crowd unmolested.

SONTHI JOINS THE BANDWAGON

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17. (U) While Buddhism already enjoys strong legal protections in Thailand, the effort to enshrine its standing in the constitution appears to have strong popular support. A large cross-section of the population supports the measure, but constitution drafters have thus far resisted pressure to include the language in the draft constitution, claiming it is both unnecessary and needlessly provocative to Thailand's non-Buddhist population.

18. (C) Thai leaders have moved to preempt groups campaigning against the constitution from seizing on the issue to derail the draft constitution. On April 25 Prime Minister Surayud Chulanont publicly indicated concern that the demonstrations could lead to a rejection of the draft constitution. (On April 26, one of the protest's top organizers, retired General Thongchai Kuasakun, urged those in attendance to vote against the constitution in the referendum if the provision on Buddhism is not included.) Council for National Security (CNS) Chairman General Sonthi Boonyaratglin, a Muslim, publicly announced on April 25 that he would not oppose the designation of Buddhism as the official state religion in the constitution if it would help bring "peace to the country". As reported in reftel, Constitution Drafting Committee (CDC) Chairman Prasong Soonsiri told the Ambassador on April 24 he believes that former Prime Ministers Thaksin Shinawatra and Chavalit Yongchaiyudh were playing games with this issue in an effort to tarnish the interim government.

COMMENT

19. (C) Ever since the coup, our contacts have told us that rewriting the constitution would reopen debate on Buddhism's status, and they warned this could become the most contentious issue. While it has generated debate, many do not feel it represents the most critical area of concern, which instead may be the functions and composition of the branches of government. Several contacts have suggested to us that most Buddhists feel that including the designaSNna;QQ7}\QxQk{q;QQt that the

protests did not draw as large a crowd as expected indicates that, at least so far, this issue has failed to excite the interest that many had hoped -- and some had feared -- it would generate. End Comment.

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